3: Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1956
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

The Interpretation of the Ceremony

X 881 (*c*) *The chisungu as a rite of status change.* Uninitiated women are referred to contemptuously in Bemba society. Is there any evidence that the rites are definitely considered as a means of admitting the chisungu candidates to a new social group such as an age grade?

The ceremonies have many of the elements common to puberty ritual which is said definitely to mark the entry of a boy or girl to a new group—such as occurs, for instance, when the Sotho adolescent of either sex becomes an initiation candidate, and then a grown-up person.

As in these other ceremonies esoteric knowledge is revealed in return for payment by the candidates or their relatives in terms of endurance of suffering or discomfort—a payment in kind. The Bemba parents pay the *nacimbusa* and give her food. The girls are teased and troubled.

But here the similarities end. There is no evidence that even in former days girls who had been 'danced' were clearly distinguished in terms of clothing or ornaments from those who had not. The great *banacimbusa* wore plumed head-dresses and leopard skins but these were tributes to their individual eminence apparently, and not to any stage in their passage through a series of age grades. Linguistically, too, there is no distinct terminology describing a formal age grade. The term *mukashyana* is used for a young girl just before marriage and just after, and as we saw, the occupations of the two are very similar. Marriage does not bring an independent status in any sense of the word. Such terms as *citongo* and *cipele* are used now, at any rate, rather as terms of abuse slung about in the heat of a village quarrel than as a description of social categories. They imply a change of state from the unmarriageable to the marriageable rather than membership of a new group. They indicate possession of or absence of knowledge of marital behaviour and social etiquette. The chisungu confers the right to bear a child, but not to join an age set.

X 881
793
● 555 Nevertheless the girl does acquire new relationships through her chisungu and submits herself to new authorities. It goes without saying that she is in a somewhat different position with regard to her affinal relatives since the ceremony is the first of a series of rites which mark the gradual consolidation of the marriage rela-

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FQ5 Bemba FQ5

tionship.[1] But the girl also assumes a position in an informal group composed of the women of the neighbourhood. The chisungu candidate of one year works the following year for the same *nacimbusa* and joins the ranks of her young helpers. The mistress of the ceremony is often the girl's father's sister, so that the head of this loosely organized cult group is also the senior woman of the patrikin. All *banacimbusa* of a district are arranged in order of age, descent and reputation, although their position is now only recognized in terms of respect and formal salutations. Associated with these women leaders of the society are younger married women of intelligence and personality, who are beginning to practise as midwives, as well as those initiated some years previously. Girls just initiated are under an obligation to help their own *nacimbusa* for one or two subsequent ceremonies, but they need not advance any further up the ladder of fame unless they want to do so. The chisungu gives them entry to the company of the leading women in the neighbourhood and makes it possible for them to rise gradually in the hierarchy of potential *nacimbusa*, although it is not compulsory for them to do so.

Within this loose neighbourhood group the older women are honoured, not as a group of equals, but, in line with Bemba ideals, as a number of persons arranged in an exact order of precedence. This hierarchy of age and fame is constantly expressed in the ceremony. 'The arm-pit is not higher than the shoulder' is the song which the company sings over and over again.[2] The chief *nacimbusa* appears in her plumed head-dress. The *mbusa* are offered again and again in order of rank precedence to the older women present. They are offered kneeling, and rolling on the back as to a chief. Dances are given 'for respect'. In fact more rites express the hierarchy of rank than any other form of symbolic behaviour in the chisungu.

It is perhaps worth noting that a hierarchy of closely related women is a much more common occurrence in a matrilineal tribe

[1] See page 44 which describes the chain of events which begins with the betrothal presents, and continues with the giving of food to the son-in-law, the first puberty rite, the chisungu, the marriage itself, and then the entering-in of the son-in-law some years later.

[2] I.e. the arm-pit was created to be beneath the shoulder, and this order can never be reversed.